

## Public Health Accreditation

### Transcript

This training is an introduction to *Public Health Department Accreditation*. The topics covered include:

1. An overview and goals of Public Health Department Accreditation;
2. The Value and Cost of Seeking Accreditation;
3. The Seven Steps of Accreditation;
4. The Twelve Accreditation Domains, especially Domain 12 which focuses on the role of the governing entity;
5. Resources to evaluate a health department's readiness to seek accreditation; and
6. How the county board of health and other community stakeholders can support their health department in the accreditation process.

### **Introduction: Overview of Accreditation and Public Health Accreditation**

Let's first look at what accreditation is. The successful accreditation of any type of organization suggests that the organization has undergone a review and meets certain accepted standards. Typically, accreditation is an ongoing process wherein the organization is continually improving through cycles of review and change, to meet the standards of excellence.

When an organization is labeled as "accredited," there is an assumption that certain standards set by the industry in question are being upheld by that organization. In earning accreditation, the organization is also given recognition for this achievement.

You may have heard of hospitals being accredited, or schools, and universities. Even summer youth camps can be accredited. In some cases accreditation is voluntary and in others it is necessary to continue operation or for funding support. Ultimately, accreditation is considered a type of quality assurance.

The Public Health Accreditation Board, or PHAB, was created in 2007 as a non-profit organization funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The purpose of this Board was to first develop, and then implement, a structure that would support health departments in the process of attaining accreditation.

PHAB was created with the goal of advancing the quality and performance of health departments by:

1. Recognizing health departments that meet nationally accepted standards of quality and improvement;
2. Proving to the public and policymakers that health departments can be accountable for the funding they receive;

3. Increasing the visibility and public awareness of public health services; and last but not least,
4. Clarifying the public's expectations of public health department services.

Ultimately it is the hope that accreditation leads to greater public trust, increased health department credibility, and increased support for funding of public health services and infrastructure.

Public health department accreditation began in 2011 as a voluntary process and the first health departments were accredited by PHAB in 2013. Currently hundreds of health departments are going through the accreditation process.

Let's look more closely at the public health department accreditation process and what health departments can expect if they choose to apply for accreditation. As stated by PHAB, "the goal of national public health department accreditation is to improve and protect health by advancing the quality and performance of all public health departments."

More specifically the purpose of accreditation is to provide the opportunity for public health departments to examine their current ability to meet the public health needs of the populations they serve, identify areas in which performance improvement is needed, and then strive for quality improvements. Through the process of accreditation, a fully comprehensive review and assessment of the health department's operations and management will be accomplished, including such areas as: leadership, strategic planning, community engagement, customer focus, workforce development, evaluation, and quality improvement.

The process of accreditation involves assessing the public health services and programs currently being delivered, and then building a stronger foundation upon which to improve and continue to best meet the public health needs of the community.

Achieving accreditation involves first taking a close look at how well the health department is currently functioning in meeting the health needs of the community. For example, are there unmet needs that could and should be addressed by health department services? If so, the health department will then need to address any gaps by putting into place innovative and proven programs. Engaging community partners and the public in the accreditation process is essential to success.

### **The Value and Cost of Seeking Accreditation**

While accreditation is voluntary, it can be seen as a systematic and validated method of helping ensure that a health department is meeting the needs of the population it serves. Accreditation provides an opportunity for a health department to take a close look at its current effectiveness while preparing to improve its performance for the future.

More specifically, the accreditation process can lead the health department towards becoming more responsive to focusing on public health goals shared by both the health department and the population being served. The process of accreditation encourages shared decision-making involving leadership, staff, community partners, customers and governance. It provides for support and development of the public health workforce so that they can better provide quality services and programs that address the health needs of the community. Additionally, the process of self-evaluation that occurs during the accreditation process offers an opportunity for improving performance and quality at every level of the health department.

In summary, the value of accreditation is in the guidance that the process provides in increasing the overall quality of the public health services which a health department provides.

This does not however, come without a cost. While PHAB is a non-profit organization, fees are necessary to cover the cost of the services they provide throughout the process. There is a specific fee schedule for the accreditation process based on the size of the population served by the health department. The larger the population being served, the more complex the application and review and therefore, the higher the cost. For example, in 2014 and 2015 the total fee for a health department serving less than 50,000 people was approximately \$13,000, whereas the total fee for a health department serving more than 15 million people was approximately \$95,000.

The annual fee structure is reviewed and updated annually and posted on the PHAB website. The fee covers five years of service beginning when the health department submits its application to initiate the accreditation process. It is payable in a single payment or over the span of up to five years, as agreed upon by the health department and PHAB.

The fees pay for such costs as that of the accreditation specialist from PHAB who will guide the health department through the application process. PHAB also provides training to the health department's accreditation coordinator. Additionally fees cover the site visit by a team of peer review experts, who assess the health department's operations against the national accreditation standards. PHAB also provides guidance on annual quality improvement and support for reaccreditation preparation.

Besides the fees payable to PHAB there are also manpower costs to the health department. The health department must designate an accreditation coordinator who will oversee and manage the accreditation process. The staffing of the accreditation coordinator will vary depending on the size and readiness of the health department or district, with the less well-prepared health departments requiring increased time and effort. On average in Georgia the optimal requirement would be one full time equivalent staff member for a minimum of 3 years to complete the initial process. In addition to the accreditation coordinator, many health department employees will participate in the self-

assessment and site visit, providing their input to the process, thus taking time away from their usual tasks.

Ultimately the purpose of pursuing accreditation is to create a culture that embraces continuous quality improvement across all twelve of the PHAB domains. For most health departments, this begins with several years of hard work which then transitions into an ongoing agency-wide commitment to maintain quality in known areas of excellence and to improve quality in other areas. Therefore it is important to note that a certain level of staffing will always be necessary as accreditation is an ongoing process of assessment and quality improvement. District health directors along with boards of health will have to weigh the value of accreditation against the costs to the health department or district.

### **The Seven Steps of Accreditation**

Now, let's turn to the process of accreditation through PHAB. There are seven steps, each of which will be briefly reviewed.

Step 1 is *Pre-application*, and this is when the health department leadership decides if it is ready to apply for accreditation and undergo the process. During this timeframe the health department personnel and its board of health members take the time to learn about the accreditation process and determine whether or not the health department is eligible and ready to apply. PHAB has provided Accreditation Readiness Checklists for the health department and its board of health, which will help assess their readiness for application and check that internal processes and staff are in place to support the application process.

Three documents that a health department must have completed to apply for accreditation are a community health assessment, a community health improvement plan, and a department strategic plan. These three items must be no greater than five years old to meet PHAB requirements. Completing a self-study to review current practices is strongly recommended during this phase. This is also the point at which it will be necessary to appoint a health department accreditation coordinator. This person will be responsible for overseeing the entire accreditation process. And finally, a Statement of Intent will be submitted to PHAB indicating that the health department and its board of health are ready and prepared to apply for accreditation.

Step 2 is the *Application for Accreditation*. The health department submits the formal application to PHAB stating their commitment to the accreditation process. PHAB will determine the fee, which must be paid prior to receiving training from PHAB. When the fee is paid, the health department's accreditation coordinator will begin in-person training with PHAB.

There are several categories of application for county health departments. One is a single county health department applying for and going through accreditation on its own. The second category is for a district or regional health department that may be

administratively composed of several health departments under one umbrella. In this category, the health departments undergo accreditation as one unit. This is the best approach for health departments in Georgia since they are organized by districts and under the central leadership and administration of the district health director. The third category is for several independent health departments whose work is so interconnected that going through the accreditation process all together makes the most practical sense.

Step 3 is *Documentation Selection and Submission*. It is during this phase that the health department completes and uploads documents to the PHAB website, to demonstrate how they are meeting the PHAB Standards and Measures of accreditation. This step is critical as the completion of these documents demonstrates how the health department has assessed itself against accreditation standards. Additionally, the submitted documents provide supporting evidence and identified improvement opportunities.

Step 4 is the *Site Visit* during which a team of public health experts and practitioners provide a peer review and examine the documentation provided by the health department against what they see on-site. The site visit not only provides the team the opportunity to verify the documentation that the health department submitted, but also offers a time for any questions they might have about the health department's self-assessment. Board of health members are also involved at this phase and will meet with the site team. Following the site visit, the team will provide the health department with a written report of what they found, recognizing areas of excellence as well as opportunities for improvement.

Step 5 is the *Accreditation Decision*. Based on the site visit report, the PHAB Accreditation Committee will grant the status of either "Accredited" or "Not Accredited" to the health department. Should a health department not be accredited, it has the opportunity to submit an Action Plan to the Accreditation Committee. If the Action Plan is approved and steps are taken to resolve identified issues, the accreditation status can be updated to "Accredited." Should the health department not follow through with submission of the action plan and corrective steps, the accreditation status remains "Not Accredited."

Step 6 is the phase during which the accredited health department *reports yearly* to PHAB concerning areas that they are improving and areas in which they continue to meet the standards and measures of accreditation. This period lasts for 5 years at which time accreditation will be due for renewal and the process will begin again. During these five years PHAB provides ongoing consultation in the health department's quality and performance improvement journey.

Step 7 is *Reaccreditation*, which occurs every 5 years. Towards the end of the 5-year accreditation period, PHAB will work with the health department to determine the reaccreditation process.

## Twelve Accreditation Domains

It is important to be familiar with how the health department will be assessed during the accreditation process. The PHAB Standards and Measures, upon which accreditation is based, are the guidelines for achievement of accreditation. These standards and measures are grouped into 12 domains. The first 10 domains are based on the 10 Essential Public Health Services. The two additional domains are Domain 11, which addresses management and administration, and Domain 12, which addresses governance. It is Domain 12 that directly relates to activities and interests of the board of health members. We will briefly review the domains here.

*Domain 1* focuses on determining the health needs of the population in the jurisdiction served by the health department. In brief, this entails collecting and analyzing data about the population to determine where to focus health improvement efforts and then sharing the information with policy makers and the public.

*Domain 2* covers the identification of new outbreaks or epidemics, and environmental hazards that could affect the health of a community. This includes timely investigations and containment of the disease or hazard, and coordinated responses to emergency situations.

*Domain 3* requires the health department to have open, two-way communications with its constituents. This includes providing accurate health information and education to the public as well as listening to the needs of the public.

*Domain 4* covers community engagement. Community partners can help health department leaders learn about issues in the population as well as help identify and implement solutions that will successfully address those issues.

*Domain 5* ensures that the health department will have the appropriate plans and policies in place to be effective in addressing the public health needs of its jurisdiction.

*Domain 6* offers guidance on the regulatory nature of public health regulations, rules and ordinances. The health department does not necessarily enforce these laws, but it is responsible for education about the laws and assisting law enforcement agencies with monitoring compliance issues.

*Domain 7* focuses on the assessment of the public's ability to access the health care they need. While the health department may not itself be the provider of health care to meet every need, it has the important role of identifying gaps in health care services and suggesting strategies to close those gaps.

*Domain 8* ensures that the health department will play a role in training the existing and future public health workforce, in terms of both quantity and quality.

*Domain 9* addresses the best practices related to quality improvement and performance management in all the services provided by the health department. The health department should monitor program outcomes and compare them to intended results in a systematic and continuous fashion that leads to quality improvement.

*Domain 10* relates to using the best-known practices in the public health field. It also addresses contributions to the body of evidence by participating in research when and where possible.

*Domain 11* focuses on the necessity to have an operational and managerial structure that best optimizes the mission of public health. Knowledgeable leadership must be in place to organize the human resources, manage the budget, and effectively guide the entire organization in providing mandated and other needed services.

And last, but certainly not least is *Domain 12*, which addresses governance of the health department. PHAB uses the generic term “governing entity” but here in Georgia the governing entities are the county boards of health.

Domain 12 encourages the ongoing engagement of the boards of health with their health departments in matters of public health policy, overall obligations and responsibilities to the population being served, high level management, and efforts to seek accreditation.

It is important to note that PHAB supports the board of health’s involvement in making public health decisions. PHAB does not dictate what a board of health and health department must do. Rather the PHAB Standards and Measures provide guidance for the health department in achieving their goals of improving the health status of the community they serve.

### **Supporting the Health Department in the Accreditation Process**

Now let’s take a further look into the role of the board of health during the accreditation process.

First and foremost the board of health can provide leadership for the process. The board can bring accreditation to the table at board meetings, educate itself on the process, and support the district health director in the initial stages as well as throughout the accreditation cycle.

When the health department is ready to apply for accreditation the board of health can provide the required letter of support in a timely manner. The board can be present and participate in the PHAB site visit, answering questions as needed and supporting the health department personnel as appropriate. When accreditation is achieved the board of health can lead the celebration of successful accreditation!

Successful accreditation is a good opportunity for the board of health to obtain the same type of positive public relations that the schools, fire department, and hospitals do when they achieve accreditation. But the leadership and support do not stop there.

While the health department is maintaining its accreditation during the five years prior to reaccreditation, the board of health can become familiar with the site visit report, noting areas of excellence and working on opportunities for improvement. The board can assist the district health director and lead staff members in the process of continuous quality improvement – setting the stage for the next round of accreditation assessment.

By keeping the accreditation cycle on the agenda for board meetings, board of health members can be active and engaged throughout the process providing important support and encouragement to the health department. For success, it is absolutely necessary that board of health members champion the process by participating at all stages of accreditation in tandem with the district health director and staff.

In summary, active engagement by the board of health with the health department in the accreditation process is critical for successful achievement of public health department accreditation.



## Discussion Questions

Consider the following questions:

1. If your county health department is interested in public health department accreditation, has it assessed its readiness to apply for accreditation?
2. Does the health department have the staff and financial resources to seek accreditation? If not, are there funding sources to support these required resources?
3. What community assets, stakeholders and organizations (public health, health care and other community organizations) could be engaged to help support accreditation in the health department?

## Resources for Boards of Health

Leaders within your community, including the district health director, may have further insight into these issues. In addition, for more information on public health accreditation, review:

- Public Health Accreditation Board (<http://www.phaboard.org/>)

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